

Ontario Daily Bulletin

Self-help legal center opens at courthouse

By Michelle Rester
June 11, 2003

POMONA - Justice isn't supposed to be just for those who can afford it, said officials who celebrated Wednesday's opening of a free self-help legal center at the Pomona Courthouse.

The help has been a blessing to Vernona Williams of Pomona, who found her way into the seventh-floor office before the afternoon event. It was the first time she's had to be in court.

Volunteer attorneys there helped her figure out what paperwork she needed and how to fill out the forms, she said.

"I can't tell you all the running around in this building I had to do until I was told about this place," Williams said. "I don't know what people do without this. Without their help, I wouldn't have been able to get this done, or at least properly."

Williams is one of more than 60 people a day who use the Pomona Self-Help Legal Access Center. That number is expected to double or triple now that the center has been expanded, officials said.

The center opened in October 2001, in a corner of the courthouse cafeteria. Services were offered one day a week, and officials say most of that took place in the hallways.

County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who secured \$248,000 in county money in January to renovate an entire office in the courthouse for the center, said it is needed to provide judicial services to less-affluent people who otherwise would be limited in their access to a fair day in court.

"This is a center that is going to break down the barriers ... to the court," Molina said.

Now open 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, the center offers a variety of help. Two staff attorneys from Neighborhood Legal Services run the program, with help from volunteer attorneys, law students from the La Verne College of Law and paralegal students from Mt. SAC.

The days are broken into two shifts. In the mornings, attorneys help with filing for or responding to divorces, paternity issues and child custody and visitation, officials said.

Starting at 1:30 p.m., they offer help with evictions, small claims, divorce, paternity and child custody and visitation, officials said.

The idea for the free self-help center in Pomona began two years ago, when a small group of attorneys and judges began meeting, said Caron Caines, supervising attorney for the center.

The idea was to help the growing number of people who represent themselves in court - often because they cannot afford their own attorneys.

"They have to do this themselves," Caines said. "To do that, they need to feel empowered and that's what they can get here."